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## Interventions: *disClosure* interviews Steve Pile

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Michael Bégin, James Hanlon, and Jessica Hollis

## Interventions

disClosure interviews Steve Pile

(10 February 2001)

Steve Pile is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University. He is author of *The Body and the City* (Routledge, 1996) and co-editor of several books, including *Place and the Politics of Identity* (Routledge, 1993) and *Geographies of Resistance* (Routledge, 1997) with Michael Keith; *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (Routledge, 1995) and *City A-Z* (Routledge, 2000) with Nigel Thrift; and *Places through the Body* (Routledge, 1998) with Heidi Nast. His teaching at the OU has involved publications such as *City Worlds* with Doreen Massey and John Allen (Routledge, 1999) and *Social Change* with Tim Jordan (Blackwell, 2002). In addition, he has written a number of articles and book chapters on urban space, identity, the body, psychoanalysis, and the work of Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and Frantz Fanon.

Pile was an invited speaker in the Committee on Social Theory's Spring 2001 Distinguished Speaker Series on the Metropolis at the University of Kentucky. His talk, entitled "The Haunted City," explored the "psychic life" of cities through various figures and figurations such as ghosts, dreams, and the dead. His talk built upon his broader interests in pursuing alternative understandings of the intersections between space, politics, and identity which flesh out some of the anxieties and contradictions through which cities are made and lived in an everyday sense.

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Our interview begins with a discussion of Pile's interests and reference points, both past and present, with an emphasis on working toward what might be called a more "expressive" form of scholarship. As our conversation proceeded, we found ourselves negotiating a number of tensions and contentions: from personal and collective engagements with city life, to the analytical purchase of dreams, to issues of subjectivity and agency.

**disClosure:** We would like to begin by asking you to summarize some of the ways in which the key insights that you have drawn from thinkers such as Freud, Benjamin, and Lefebvre inform your work on the social, spatial, and psychic life of cities.

**Steve Pile:** It's a funny thing being asked to summarize your work. You have to look back over it and wonder about what it is that you do. What is it that I do? Does it summarize easily? I guess the best way to think about it for myself is to think about where I started and how my work was moved forward in a lot of ways. I think that what I do is really summed up by the title of the first book that I edited, *Place and the Politics of Identity*. I've never really moved off this particular agenda. I think the agenda of that book was to throw into question or to open up the question of how we understand place and what we really think about it—how places are associated with certain kinds of politics and how identity is thrown into the mix of that relationship between politics and place. That book was really an intervention in a way that people are starting to think about place and a way that people think about the politics of identity. Now as I think about the work that I have conducted since, I think that everything I've done has been an intervention and a moment, and that's why I have a little bit of difficulty summarizing what I do. Each thing that you do along the way is really related into the kinds of debates that are being undertaken at the time. At the moment, I'm trying to think about the relationship between place and emotion and how emotions are a part of the ways in which we kind of really "do" place: how places get made, how they're thought about, how we're involved in place, and how everything to do with places has an affective, emotional, felt intensity, or felt side to it, and to really see that as constitutive of the way places are.

So, that's one side of it. On the identity side of things I'm trying to get away from that sense that identity is something stable, enduring, coherent, integrated, and bounded. In the sense that places have an emotional side to them, an emotional intensity to them, I'm thinking about people as also having an emotional intensity to them, which is often paradoxical, ambiguous, ambivalent—all those kinds of things that we are, moody. To try and put together all the kinds of things we do know about people and think about how that actually involves people in poli-

tics in various kinds of ways, and to really carry those arguments forward and to make them operative. I think you need some sort of resources of thought to do this and you need to draw on different styles of thought. There are lots of different styles of thought that you can deploy, but I've been particularly drawn to psychoanalytic styles of thought. It's true that currently I'm drawing on Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, and I think that I'm kind of walking through the city with Freud and Benjamin because they both give a sense to our experience of the emotionality of place and a way of interpreting and getting at that, but also that sense of how different kinds of memories will come to us and how that plays out, the different kinds of ways and different kinds of moods that we can have when we're around and about cities. So, it's those two authors at the moment that I am really using to get at some of the ways in which place and identity and politics might be bound up with one another.

Lefebvre I'm not really doing at the moment. I haven't read Lefebvre for a while now, and I think that's just the nature of the interventions you want to make at particular times. Why did I draw on Lefebvre in my earlier work? Well, Lefebvre was really useful at the moment when I was trying to say in geography that, hey, we could think about psychoanalysis. It was something we could draw on (and, by the way, Lefebvre did this). It was a perfectly legitimate set of ideas to draw on at a stage when geographers didn't really think that psychoanalysis was that legitimate. There's also a frustration with the way that Lefebvre himself was being read. He was always being used as a Marxist thinker to talk about the production of space in a political economy mode or as a kind of political economy. Production was about the manufacturing of space. The way I read Lefebvre was to think about a role for the imagination and psychic processes that are involved in the production of space, and that are—at one and the same time—constitutive of cities. So Lefebvre for me was a way of getting between or creating a bridge between psychoanalysis and geography at that stage. He was someone that geographers knew about but also somebody who had already thought through using psychoanalysis. At the moment I'm much more interested in creating a more expressive geography and using psychoanalysis and some of the more expressive sociologists like Georg Simmel and Siegfried Krakauer, as well as in thinking more along the lines of German Expressionism.

**dC:** Is that what you mean then when you use the word "intervention," creating a new, more expressive geography as a kind intervention in itself?

**SP:** Yeah, I mean, geography is knowledge. Geography is about debate, isn't it? So, the kinds of knowledges that are being produced are very much of the moment, and certain kinds of debates are around and



about at particular times. Now, I think what I want to do is an expressive geography, but I didn't know I wanted to do that fifteen years ago. I wouldn't have even known how to put those two words together at that stage. You're doing different kinds of work at different moments. So, I always think of knowledge as an intervention. I don't think of it as being a truth that is told. It's more like, well, there are debates, what kinds of things are being said, and what can we add to those debates in order to make us go forward from them, and to think something new, something that we couldn't think before? That's why I draw on psychoanalysis, because I think that it's something that's quite useful for contributing to current debates. It's something that a lot of us know about when we read theory (if you like) because psychoanalysis is often in critical theories. So, it's quite useful to say, well, let's take this part of a critical theory and really think about it. So, I do think of knowledge as being an intervention in a moment and as a way of moving things forward.

**dC:** Is expressive geography in some fashion a reaction to traditional quantitative geography, which seems more objective and scientific and less expressive?

**SP:** I think it's a reaction to quite a lot of things that I think geography, and even social science more broadly, is doing at the moment. What I'm calling expressive geography is mainly about trying to produce forms of writing that are actually adequate to the kinds of objects that we're trying to describe. There's a style of writing at the moment that is used broadly in geography, a way of expressing the world or telling stories about the world that doesn't really acknowledge its storytellingness. So, it has a kind of objectivity to it. I mean, when you read—I'm going to be really unfair to a particular journal, which is *Society and Space*—so when you read *Society and Space*, very often you get paragraphs at the beginning that say, this paper is about "X" and there have been 25 studies of this kind of thing before, and there's this great big huge long list of other studies which are never then referred to subsequently. Then the author says, but you know this particular thing that I'm going to talk about hasn't been talked about specifically, and nobody's done this, and then you get an introduction on that bit. And that's kind of way that people start. Now in other disciplines, I think, you don't have to do that genre of writing. There are other ways in which people are allowed to write through events and objects or circumstances that do have a storytelling component to them, but they are still attempts to capture the thing that's being talked about. So, in those terms, I'm trying open up the styles of writing for geography itself, to make it more expressive of the things that it's encountering, more part of the world that it's talking about, but which are also analytic as well. So, the analytic comes out of the expression and through the different

forms of writing. The assumption would be that if you are writing about different things then you need different kinds of writing in order to capture the thing you're talking about. Those kinds of experiments are the kinds of the things that I would like to see take place in geography. I would like to see more experiments about how you would write. They're what I'm trying to do, and I don't think I've got anywhere close to it.

This is an aside, but sort of an example. I picked up this book in a record shop the other day that was about text messaging on mobile phones, and about the kinds of digits and characters that people use to send messages about. It's like whole strings of sentences, most of which were "see you tonight at eight" kind of stuff and "I love you." You think, well, how would you write about that. If you're going to talk about the geography of text messaging what would it mean to write about it in a text messaging form? Would you have to do that? What other ways might you find? What style of expression is adequate to those kinds of experiences, which people are now obviously having? The language of love is now being reduced down to these short little—I mean they're not even sound bytes anymore, are they? They're these little cryptic signs, so there's something about love on a mobile phone that you would need to think about if you're going to write about it.

Another aspect of an expressive geography would be producing forms of writing that people actually got, producing stories that most people would have access to and would have an intuitive feel for before they got surprised by whatever analytic twist you wanted to put into it. And I'm very interested in grabbing people's attention and then surprising them by making those kinds of moves that I think you can really see in Walter Benjamin. But I want to think about geography as more like intellectual journalism somehow. There are very rich traditions in sociology of intellectual journalism. We're so frightened of the word "journalism," you know, oh no, shock, horror. I'd like to see some form of storytelling that has an intuitive hook for people, and not just for academics who pore through these great big long reference lists. I've been so unfair to *Society and Space*. I was talking to one of the editors, and I was saying, yeah *Society and Space*, it's a terrible journal, and so he's like, "No, no, no! We're really experimental and you can find all sorts of different kinds of writing in our journal."

**dC:** Could you elaborate on the tension between seeking forms of writing adequate to our objects of analysis and the objects of analysis that you've taken up yourself, in terms of looking at cities in new ways and exploring the "unconscious logics of the city" or trying to understand the "vicissitudes of the dreamcity"? We're trying to find new ways of writing but we're also taking up—I don't know if it's new objects of analysis or just new ways of thinking about objects of analysis, but it



seems to me that our forms of writing and those shifts in what we're looking at are very intricately intertwined. So, how does what we're talking about now get grounded in some of your work on sleepwalking in the city?

**SP:** I think, the first answer is, I don't really know, and in many ways that's an evasion, but actually I don't really know. I'm interested in the emotional side of cities, in affect in cities. In lots of ways I'm trying to write about things that are quite intangible and to write about things for which there aren't words. What I don't know is how to use words to describe things for which there aren't words. I mean that's a real problem, and I don't know how to do that. And it's a constant problem to think about these kinds of unintelligible, unconscious, or beyond comprehension aspects of cities, and to bring them into analysis or to allow a space for them in our analyses and stories about cities.

Here's a really inappropriate metaphor, it's really inappropriate actually. In the film *Predator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger is in the jungle and there's this predator thing trying to get him. The predator is invisible but around it there's a distortion of light, and I sometimes think that what I'm trying to get at is the invisible thing, the predator. But the only way you can really read it is through these distortions around the edge, which you can't really see either. In the movie, although you see this thing sort of shimmer in the jungle, you're not really sure what you're seeing. I don't really know how you capture those moments, but some of the ways that I think of it is through this idea of the dream, this sense that the city has a dreamlike component to it or is even built out of the clashing together of different kinds of wishes and desires.

So, deliberately thinking of the city as a dream is a way of trying to figure that out, that distortion of light around the city, to try and capture those moments when it isn't quite as real as you think it is, or to really see the materiality of the city as somehow imaginative, affective. The kinds of things I started to look for in order to capture this thing you cannot see, in order to express certain kinds of emotions, are more imaginative, more mythical, even monstrous, like ghosts. Ghosts are one place in which I've tried to think about this shimmering or mirage-like quality of places and identity, but there is a whole list of other figures, like angels, aliens, vampires, werewolves. I want to use these figures as ways of thinking about the city. What do some of these characters—these non-characters, these mythical, non-existent characters—point to about city life? Once you start looking for those things, then through the logic of it you have objects to talk about, because once you start talking about ghosts, then you really do have something to talk about, because there are ghosts. There's a whole literature centered around ghosts. There are movies about ghosts and then there are all sorts of representations of ghosts. You can create an object out of the af-

fective relationships and through that sense of the distortion around the thing. I'm really building objects through which you might be able to figure the city or see certain aspects of the city. That's sort of the idea anyway.

But I don't want to presume the object, and that's part of the problem, that I think the object, even a city, becomes—to use that language of dreams—like a condensation of certain kinds of emotions, anxieties, endeavors, labor, all sorts of things. The goal is to not presume the city, which is also the thing you're looking at. I think it's something I don't really know how to do. It's a real puzzle. We also should not allow these kinds of affective or emotional sides of cities simply to become a formula where you sort of wander off and map fear, and here's desire. Rather, we should allow them to sort of flow around and move. It's not even to turn those things into objects. It's very awkward so it's a puzzle. I like it. It wouldn't be worth doing if I knew what I was doing.

**dC:** We're talking about the felt intensities of the city, emotive responses to the city, and one of the things that you mentioned in "Sleepwalking in the Modern City" are moments of revolutionary self-realization. You describe Freud's moment of self-realization during his walk through the red-light district in Genoa, and you mention that those are for the most part privatized experiences. Are they so by virtue of them being self-realizations or are there other forces at work which deter them from being otherwise? This gets at some of what Simmel was talking about in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" regarding the protective mechanisms that people put up to defend themselves against a super-saturation of stimuli. Obviously there are very private responses that people just keep private by choice, but is there something about being in a city that keeps those experiences from being shared, versus perhaps if we were talking about some kind of moment of revolutionary self-realization somewhere else outside of the city?

**SP:** Yes, that's kind of a nexus of questions there, really. Let's start with cities. Do cities provoke, house, or accommodate different forms of emotion? I hope so. Otherwise my work is going to look a bit silly. I like Simmel's arguments about indifference and the blasé attitude, but the way I understand the argument is that it's about the quantity. It's the amount of things that go on in cities that cause people to react with a kind of hands-offness or indifference, so that the distance that people produce between themselves and the world is about the quantity of things that are going on. In that sense, it's easier to see how cities could be a place in which you have a lot of different things thrown at you in contrast to non-city places. In fact, I actually think that things like suburbs are actually built to calm down the number of things that are going on. It's not that they don't have city elements to them, but it's the quantity of things that are gathered together in cities that make people



respond to them in different kinds of ways. There are all sorts of things that one might develop from an argument like that. So, we're thinking about the quantity of things that are going on in cities and how people respond—but of course that's very exciting as well, which is also something that Simmel says. Freud and Simmel are both blasé about all these excitements, but we also can be bound up and entrained in those excitements as well. Just thinking about the bright lights of the city and all the common ways that we think about the city having bright lights, all these excitements, theatre, cinema, and all these things that are just kind of there, this kind of thinking is what I'm after. I think this does actually capture something about city life, so I would want to see something about the felt intensity of city life as being distinctive and people having different, personal responses to them.

I think the question at the heart of what you're talking about is really, well, if people have these personal responses, then what does that mean for any kind of collective response? First, are they collective responses? Second, if we're thinking of some of these personal responses or even the collective relationships of cities as being somehow not as good as they might be (to put it at its weakest), then how would one intervene in some of those personal experiences to make them part of a collective endeavor to make cities better? So, first off is how does one get from the personal to the collective? One of the things that I've been very keen not to do in my work is to reduce personal experiences into the collective, or vice-versa, to make the collective experience simply personal, so that there is always this relationship. Seeing what is being made private, (which is what I mean by privatized), what is being made, or talked about, as if it is personal and private and what kinds of boundaries do people draw around themselves to make things private. And, alternatively, how do people see themselves, how are people involved with collective experiences, or how can a sense of collective experience be built out of people's engagement with the world.

So, in other words, where all this ends is back with this sense that people are ambivalent or paradoxical, with people being simultaneously personal or private and collective. And it's very difficult actually to say what is personal and private as opposed to what is collective or not. So, really, when you're thinking about these things, you're really thinking about a set of constitutive relations outside of Freud, for example. You're asking what is it that he was drawing on in order to create this experience, which he thought of as being very much about himself. It's his personal experience of the uncanny. His experience of it was drawing on a whole set of cultural repertoires and even readings of space in order to have that experience at all. So, I think there are quite a lot of ways in which psychoanalysis un-bounds the subject to make it bigger and smaller at various points and allows us to see a two-

way flow of these kinds of interactions, which people can read as personal but which are also deeply embedded in cultural ways of being. So, what a person might be is really about ways in which they learn to draw in all these cultural repertoires; they become a person precisely because they do those things in unique ways and experience those things uniquely. But that doesn't mean to say they're simply born with a personality that is somehow continuous all the way through life—it's bounded and autonomous and integrated and so on. People are always drawing on collective things, yet the collective is not a bounded, homogenous experience at all, but is actually about the way in which people respond to one another. So, you have a much more heterogeneous sense of what collectives are about as well as a much fuzzier boundary around that.

All of that presents a whole series of problems for what one might consider to be political interventions in, say, city life. I think a lot of the ways politics is supposed to work is that it produces these nice rational agendas that people all sign up to because they all agree. I like the idea that when people get involved in politics it's actually because the antagonisms and differences entrain them. They may share a set of debates but they're all being entrained in very different ways—which is why, when you're in political situations, everybody's arguing. That's what binds people together: the nature of the argument. Thinking precisely about how you get from those privatized experiences to the senses of political action and through the ways in which you create alliances on stable grounds, and thus thinking about the imaginative and affective ways in which people get drawn into politics, are some of the things I'm really interested in. I think most politics work at an affective level before anything else—when people intuitively have a sense of what is right and then get involved. I'm interested in that leap forward. So, that's one side of the argument.

I think the other thing is actually to think about dreams. There are lots of rhetorics about dreams and some of them are about imagining better futures for people. Dare I mention the American dream? Probably not. But there's that sense of the American dream that if you do particular kinds of things then things will get better. So, I think that that dream part really binds people at an affective level. There's a sense that things will be all right. You'll get your dream if you do different kinds of things. That word has a shimmering, affective resonance already to it. That's why it works. I got interested in the rhetoric of dreams because I always thought it was a political rhetoric. If we could use the rhetoric of dreams, then that would be a way of re-imagining how we think about utopias, better futures. What does it mean to dream? Does that mean that we dream of rationally planned cities or does it mean that we actually dream of ways in which the city is precisely democratic because it



incorporates antagonistic positions? And how do we imagine the city that is built around alliances, compromises, antagonisms, and conflict? That kind of a city, as a dream rather than a *Le Courbousier*—straight lines, lots of light and air—kind of city. So we can see other ways of thinking about how you get from privatized experiences to collective ones by finding words that capture the essence of both at the same time, and I think that “dream” is both a personal word and a collective word at the same time. So it’s using that as kind of traffic. I think “ghost” is also another useful word; we all have our personal hauntings and yet there’s a collective sense about hauntings. It’s about finding words that traffic between collective and private experiences. How’s that for an answer? That sounded quite plausible, didn’t it?

**dC:** I would like to follow up with the idea of the rhetoric of the dream. I think it’s almost a cliché that one person’s dream is another person’s nightmare. And so, for example, the idea of the American dream can be seen as one form of utopia that calls upon Americans, in constituting themselves as Americans, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, be the rugged individualist, rags-to-riches, self-made man (to acknowledge the very gendered aspect of all this). That dream has, in a lot of ways, been very oppressive. And certainly it seems to me that, in exploring the rhetoric of the dream and employing psychoanalytic approaches to understanding the emotive responses of people to city life, we might try and understand how it is that race and class antagonisms operate as vectors of oppression, and how racial and class identities are socially constructed and reconstituted through the expressions of the rhetoric of these dreams.

**SP:** Right. Let’s be clear about what it means to focus on dreams. Dreams will do a particular kind of work, I think. I quite like it actually as a method of analysis, an interpretive method—a way of interpreting how affect and material science and all those things get bound up in the production of space. Dreams aren’t hugely useful about systems of oppression, and I think you would need other things to do that kind of work. So, I don’t want to make too much of that dream stuff. Ditto ghosts. I think that the ghosts are very good at capturing certain kinds of things but not others. I wouldn’t want to make more of dreams than they will do. And I only want to do with dreams certain kinds of things. This is our Predator, capturing a particular distortion around a thing, and then thinking, can I look at it from another angle and then see something else? I certainly do think that the rhetorics of race and class are built into the rhetorics of dreams. I think you can actually see some of the ways in which certain kinds of emotions are bound up in certain rhetorics of dreams that are intended to occlude all sorts of things. And that’s precisely why dreams are useful, because of the affective hook. You don’t really think of the consequences or who has ac-

cess to certain kinds of dreams, who can actually turn those dreams into a reality. So, that’s not to make too much of dreams.

On the other hand, I want to make much more of dreams than that, much more than race and class. I want dreams to be small things and really, really big things. Part of the logic for that is I know there are people who don’t dream, but every culture, everywhere, so far as I’m aware, has an account of dreams, which means that dreams are pretty much a universal experience. And there aren’t very many things that you can say are universal experiences. Birth, death—maybe not even death, maybe not even birth, maybe not dreams. But it’s almost universal, which means that dreams in a lot of ways cut across or cut outside of demarcations of race, class, and gender. And I’m interested in how that works. So, despite these great categories of sociological analysis—class, race, gender—the experience of dreaming means that everybody has access to this rhetoric. Everybody knows intuitively what it means to dream. Now what does that mean? I don’t know what it means. But dreams have to hook into much broader experiences, beyond the easy divisions between races or however those categories work. So, that’s why I’m interested in dreams, because you can’t really say of those things that they are the feelings of one particular class or race or whatever. Dreams constantly bleed out of those categories, those divisions, and highlight them as well, just as ghosts do. They’re expressive of those categories and an undermining of them at the same time. So, it’s that doubleness of the rhetoric that intrigues me.

**dC:** Are you talking about the kind of dreaming people do when they’re asleep?

**SP:** Yes, I am talking about that. The rhetoric of dreams is also about how those experiences get narrated and therefore experienced on waking. There are all sorts of different ways in which dreams are experienced. There’s something about the “facts” of dreaming, which is never a fact because dreams are always mediated through the different understandings of them, and that’s the big and small thing. Dreaming is this thing that everybody does, but nobody ever does it in exactly the same way.

**dC:** During your response, I started thinking about Carl Jung and his purported findings in his research among cultures in the American South, where he found evidence of a supposed collective unconscious. African Americans experienced symbols in their dreams that came to them evidently without any former knowledge of those symbols and their meanings.

**SP:** Yeah, yeah, the collective unconscious. One of the things you can do in bookshops is you can go in and buy those books that will interpret dreams for you. It’s a bit like watches, really. If you have one



watch, you know the time; if you have two, you don't. If you have one dream book, then you know what your dream means; if you have two, then you have no idea. Just go and look up "shoes" in those dream books and you'll see exactly what I mean. So, what I mean is that it's a method of interpretation. I think that the one thing you can do with dreams is go back a little for archaic symbols and that would point in the direction of the collective unconscious. I think it's exactly the opposite, actually, that what dreams tell us is the ways in which individuals are drawing on cultural repertoires, but also putting them into stories and fantasies, or whatever, in exactly their own ways, with very personal meanings bound up in them. And that's precisely that kind of "site of traffic." So, I think that dreams are social things. It's something that everybody does. There's something universal about it, but there's also something deeply personal about it. Only you are doing it. Nobody is making you dream in a particular way.

On the other hand, there are all these social situations built into how we read other people, and also a whole set of cultural repertoires for the symbolizing of events and things. So, that's what's fascinating about it. It is this deeply personal thing that is socially embedded and socially experienced as well. The other good thing about dreams, I think, is that you can never tell them. In that desire to talk about the things you can't talk about, dreams are pretty good because you can say "dreams" and everybody knows what you mean. On the other hand, if you ever tried telling somebody about your dreams, then you know you only capture about three percent of it and the rest of it is constantly vanishing on you as you talk. I quite like the fact that it's a way of talking about the thing that you can't talk about. It's almost as if you don't need the words because people intuitively pick up on some of these things. Like ghosts. Not everybody has experienced ghosts but people know what you mean, yet they're something that doesn't exist. Everybody knows what you mean, but it doesn't exist! So, it's curious like that. Ghosts are pretty widespread as well. Yeah, they're pretty widespread. There are a lot of them about. Word of advice.

**dC:** We've been talking about dreaming being a personal experience that we all share as well as a collective experience with potential for political intervention. Could you say more about what new directions you see analyses of identity, subjectivity or notions of agency taking in social theory?

**SP:** One of the reasons Nigel Thrift and I edited *Mapping the Subject* is that at the time we thought that too few models of subjectivity were available to geographers, and essentially the intention was to create this smorgasbord of options for thinking about subjectivity at that stage. In some ways the book was simply saying, this is a more complex puzzle, and we really need to be proliferating our understandings

of subjectivity. One of the ways of answering this question is to ask what wasn't in *Mapping the Subject*. What has come about since? One of the areas that has really become quite prominent within geography, and I think elsewhere, is the issue of performativity. Thinking about not just performance (because I think that's been around for a very long time) but about structures of performance, or the ways in which people learn to perform in certain kinds of ways. So, that the sense of the subject and performance and how one performs and one performs self are bound up in one another. This would be to pick up on Judith Butler type arguments. But more broadly situated issues of performativity, which draws on ideas from Deleuze and Guattari, have also become more prominent in geography and elsewhere.

The thing I'm most interested at the moment, however, is arguments about the dispersal of subjectivity, so that it's almost an argument about non-subjectivity, non-agency, about thinking of the range of resources around people. The resources around people are actually the doing-ness of subjectivity, so you can't really talk about subjects per se. This is a strong Foucauldian argument at some level, but it's mainly being picked up through arguments around actor-network theory. According to these theories there aren't really actors/agents who do things; there aren't really consciously motivated agents who do things. People's resources are distributed through networks, and it's almost networks that are doing things. These arguments distress me at some level because, one, I don't believe in a coherent, bounded, autonomous subject, but I do think there are subjects who do things. There are agents and actors, and I like all that. I like all that language because I like to be able to say that people can *do* things and that they affect and mean and intend things. That doesn't mean that they get what they want or that they know what they want, or even that those intentions are particularly well thought out or operated. I think there are some ways in which the radicalization of the subject through these networks of dispersals can really lose something that is very important or vital about how people live and experience their lives, and I worry when we can't talk about those things. So, those are the kinds of developments I'm watching because I in part agree with them. I'm very sympathetic to them, but I am worried about some of the outcomes of certain kinds of arguments.

**dC:** It seems to me that one of the interesting things about actor-network theory is that subjectivity is not restricted by bodily boundaries. In other words, all of these "resources" or "networks" could be seen as extensions of the body and the subject. Do you think this idea of the body extending beyond its fleshy boundaries contributes to some sort of agency?

**SP:** Yes, I do, but I'm not sure how to answer that because in part I'm



wondering whether you're asking me whether accounting for non-human or the fluid aspect of bodies means that you can't have a subject that acts as an agent or conceives of itself as an agent and therefore acts as agent.

dC: Yes, exactly.

SP: I don't think there's a necessary contradiction there. Simply by thinking about bodies as bigger and smaller in lots of ways, with the skin being only one place in which we might conceive of bodies as stopping, doesn't mean to say that we can't think of agency. We just need to think agencies in a lot different kinds of ways, so, again, breaking that sense of the human as being coherent, consistent, etc., also means that we need to think of different forms of agency. And that means that we can also think of non-human things acting too. They may not act in the ways that conceive of themselves as acting, but they can do things. Famously, doorknobs, of course. Doorknobs make us do things in all sorts of ways. We won't get out of this room unless we allow the doorknob to tell us what to do. I read John Law's *Organizing Modernity* (and he's an actor-network theorist), and he said, of scientists, in order for scientists to do what they do, we shouldn't think of them as having personal resources, genius in any way. We should think about all the resources that they gather together, which include communities of plausibility, so that a theory is only true when a lot of people believe it. It's not whether the theory is true or not. Its plausibility relies on a lot of people also saying the same thing. A theory that nobody believes is a useless theory. There are all those kinds of things as well as material things that you can gather together—like particular kinds of equipment, the expert, or the sense of expertise—none of which are localizable within individuals. It's all about these things that are gathered through networks.

So, Law is talking about the scientists like this and then he says, well the leader of this laboratory is actually a charismatic character. He's charismatic, and I don't know what to make of this, right? But the guy is charismatic; he can do these things because he's charismatic. Stick somebody else at the head who isn't charismatic and maybe he couldn't pull together these networks. Then Law says, I'm going to ignore the charisma factor because I'm really interested in the networks. But I'm sitting there thinking, well, you know, that charisma is really everything about, well, what it takes to do something? What kinds of personal resources are people gathering together, how are people reading this personal fantasy? There are a whole set of fantastic relationships involved in charisma, and that charisma allows him to do things. It's something he has, and other people may not have. So, there is something about charisma, affect, and people that *is* about agency. We may not want to think of agency in a monolithic kind of way, think of

agency in terms of an agent who does things. We may want to bring it back through some sense of that magic that people have, which is almost like the old sense of the word "genius," I think. Genius used to mean the special capacities that individuals have. Everybody had genius, and it's really just re-imagined through some of these magical ways, the body, the things that people have. I think that that's what actor-network theory eventually always has to confront, and then disperses it. I just want to gather it back and think, let's think about charisma.

dC: To bring our discussion back to the city, do cities themselves in any way allow us to imagine new, less monolithic forms of agency?

SP: Yes, absolutely. Cities present a whole set of different kinds of problems for people, and I think that people in cities find all sorts of different forms of association and I think you can see that in any city. It creates opportunities for different kinds of association, which isn't to say that only happens in cities. But you can think in all sorts of ways about the culturing of cities, all sorts of ways in which communities fight each other in cities, and think about racialized communities as well as sexual communities and all sorts of things. I have been told that there's even a community in New York of people who see the dead. Now, I can see that that might not happen in some small village. You can start to see how it becomes plausible that in a city you would have a community of people that see the dead, that they would gather in New York. They might gather in New Orleans or San Francisco, but you can see how they would choose the city to go to. It would happen in cities because cities can tolerate that difference, and while people may be antagonistic or hostile to it, it can be accommodated in cities in ways that are awkward elsewhere. Cities are constantly creating opportunities and problems for people, which do require new styles of engagement. Partly they're a cost and partly an excitement. The internet does this as well. So, it's not just cities, but the Internet is also creating other kinds of problems and resources for people, which is why it gets demonized and utopianized. It's like, oh my god, the Internet, it's so terrible, people will disengage from the real world and they'll shrivel up. As well as this, well, this utopia, it's a place where everybody can be. And that's exactly how people are also constantly reacting to cities. People are demonizing and utopianizing them. The city is hell and heaven all at the same time, and I think that that's the opportunity. That's why it's interesting.



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